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**Section:** Creative criticism

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**Keywords:** Hong Kong contemporary art; nostalgia; vernacular; transition in Chinese thought; peer activism

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# **What it might mean to live as peers of contemporary art: a personal reflection on nostalgia's demand from Hong Kong**

Yang Yeung<sup>1</sup>

## **Abstract**

The population of Hong Kong has been significantly affected by outward migration since the mass pro-democracy movement in 2019. To make sense of nostalgia as a prominent sentiment around the phenomenon, I examine the work of artist and curator duo C&G Artpartment among those who had left. While I long for a Hong Kong with C&G being around, I find inspiration in their lexicon to rethink nostalgia. C&G practices a peer activism committed to both local vernacular and global art talk. While nostalgia that is positive or negative is powered by colonizer and dominator narratives, my nostalgia for them, and for what their departure means for contemporary art in Hong Kong, is neither. It instead carries a pedagogical function. Their peer activism stays relevant in the long-run for admitting transition as an essential preparation for change.

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## **Numbered realities<sup>2</sup>**

“To leave or to stay?” This is a question that many in Hong Kong have posed to themselves and each other recurrently in the recent past. I too have been asked this same question by friends and strangers.

Some Hong Kong media reports attributed a net outflow of 95,000 people between mid-

2021 to mid-2022 to the “anti-extradition protests and unrest in 2019”, naming it a “mass exodus of Hongkongers”.<sup>3</sup> The anti-extradition protests began in the spring of 2019, culminating to the largest demonstration in Hong Kong’s history on June 16, 2019 with 2 million people, that is 28.5% of the then population, taking to the streets.<sup>4</sup> The protests were direct responses to the Hong Kong Special Ad-

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<sup>2</sup> My utmost gratitude to the critical and astute comments by the anonymous reviewers for this essay. All errors in this essay are mine.

<sup>3</sup> Almond Li, “Over 113,000 residents left city in 12 months, as Hong Kong sees largest mi-year population drop on record,” *Hong Kong Free Press*, 12 August, 2022, <https://hongkongfp.com/2022/08/12/over-113000-residents-left-city-in-12-months-as-hong-kong-sees-largest-mid-year-population-drop-on-record/>.

<sup>4</sup> Jennifer Creery & Tom Grundy, “Almost 2 million attended anti-extradition law demo, say organisers, as protesters bed in around gov’t HQ,” *Hong Kong Free Press*, 17 June, 2019, <https://hongkongfp.com/2019/06/17/almost-2-million-attended-anti-extradition-law-demo-say-organisers-protesters-bed-around-govt-hq/>

ministrative Region (hereafter HKSAR) Government's proposed Extradition Bill intended to fill a "legal loophole" to allow "fugitive transfers to jurisdictions such as mainland China."<sup>5</sup> The bill was perceived differently by the people of Hong Kong. One reason for objecting to the bill was that dissidents in Hong Kong might face framed charges under mainland China's judicial system. The bill was withdrawn in September 2019. Nine months later, Beijing introduced the National Security Law in Hong Kong.<sup>6</sup>

The HKSAR Government acknowledged a "population fall" of 0.9% from 2021 to the end of 2022 in a different narrative. A document announced that "Hong Kong residents travelling abroad are not required to declare to the Government their purpose of travel. Therefore, the Government does not have direct statistics on emigration of Hong Kong residents."<sup>7</sup> In this construction of a formal statement, the generality of "travelling abroad" acquires the specificity of "emigration" as one category out of many that qualifies the former. And yet, emigration is named only to be dismissed. The formulation draws attention to what it seeks to presents as null. As the patriotic thing to do is to "[Go] out to tell good Hong Kong stories,"<sup>8</sup> one might ask if reflecting on the very dilemma of whether to stay or leave could be regarded as a threat to national security.

Numbers are powerful, be they big or small;

they stomp out meanings and lived realities in deafening silence. Since 2019, numbers have marked dates for many in Hong Kong to register the rapidly changing social and political landscapes: from the year itself, to dates in the year for joining demonstrations and dates where injustice and injuries were done. For supporters of the movement, "2019" is more than a number. It could instil a nostalgia for the experience of solidarity. For others, "2019" could instil a nostalgia for a pre-2019, pre-protest time. However, it would be too hasty and reductive to use only these numbers to mark the struggle by the people of Hong Kong for democracy that began way earlier. It is impossible to make an exhaustive list of such efforts since Britain's rule over Hong Kong as a colony terminated in 1997 and Hong Kong under Beijing's rule began<sup>9</sup> – from the yearly candle light vigils commemorating the 1989 June 4<sup>th</sup> Tiananmen massacre that began in 1990 and ended in 2021<sup>10</sup>, to the yearly marches on July 1<sup>st</sup> since 2003 against the HKSAR Government's attempt to introduce anti-subversion legislation. While policy changes in the legal and political environment justify themselves for being clear-cut, social change and its related affective environment arise in more nuanced ways.

Nostalgia for a simplified past is accentuated by dominator and apocalyptic narratives. Since Beijing's enactment of the National Security

<sup>5</sup> Holmes Chan, "Explainer: Hong Kong's Five Demands – withdrawal of the extradition bill," Hong Kong Free Press, 23 December, 2019, <https://hongkongfp.com/2019/12/23/explainer-hong-kongs-five-demands-withdrawal-extradition-bill/>

<sup>6</sup> Grace Choi & Lam Cho Wai, "Hong Kong national security law: What is it and is it worrying?," BBC News, 28 June, 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-52765838>

<sup>7</sup> HKSAR Government, "Year-end Population Falls," HKSAR Government News, 16 February, 2022, [https://www.news.gov.hk/eng/2023/02/20230216/20230216\\_165758\\_571.html](https://www.news.gov.hk/eng/2023/02/20230216/20230216_165758_571.html).

<sup>8</sup> HKSAR Government, "'Hello Hong Kong' Campaign launched to promote Hong Kong around the world," HKSAR Government Press Release, 2 February, 2023, <https://www.info.gov.hk/gia/general/202302/20230200675.htm>.

<sup>9</sup> Amy Gunia, "A Brief History of Protest in Post-Handover Hong Kong," 20 June, 2019. TIME. <https://time.com/5606212/hong-kong-history-mass-demonstrations-protest/>

<sup>10</sup> Hong Kong Free Press, "Hong Kong park empty for the first time in 32 years as police surround venue to prevent banned Tiananmen Massacre vigil," 4 June, 2021, <https://hongkongfp.com/2021/06/04/breaking-hong-kong-park-empty-for-the-first-time-in-32-years-as-police-surround-venue-for-tiananmen-massacre-vigil/>.

Law, the idea that Hong Kong is dead has been recurrent in international media and in everyday life. In the year 2022, the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Hong Kong's sovereignty change, I heard an Australian radio report quoting a former Hong Kong resident as saying that people in Hong Kong are now living in hell. A fellow passenger I encountered on a flight that landed in Hong Kong said to me out of the blue, "Hong Kong is no more" because barristers, lawyers, doctors, are now gone. Nostalgia for a brain-drained Hong Kong aligns with the colonial narrative of Hong Kong's ascent from a "barren island" to a cosmopolitan city.<sup>11</sup> The pleasure derived from a past and the pleasure of exercising the authority to declare it dead comes at the expense of the agency of those in and of Hong Kong. In this kind of pleasure, there might also be despair. As argued by Svetlana Boym, nostalgia has been associated with affliction not only on a personal level;<sup>12</sup> but it is also a "historical emotion". In face of "Progress as a marker of global time; any alternative to this idea was perceived as a local eccentricity."<sup>13</sup>

I, too, have confronted nostalgia, but for a kind at a distance from the ruling power and other kinds of dominator narratives, a kind I am yet to name. I knew it through pain and bliss. Pain was registered in an incomplete thought I contributed to the print compendium to an exhibition on the lost language of Ornamentalism in Central Asia, which opened in the Spring of 2023 in Hong Kong:<sup>14</sup>

'Your nostalgia is my pain.' These words came visiting one day. I admitted them then; I have been resisting them since. The well-oiled work of tyranny is to bring the worst out of all, so that each one is

turned against the other. If revolt is to last as long as oppression does, these words pertaining to a physical reality must retreat, reconstitute and recalibrate. I am still in the process; I am the process. I am willing, because you keep me company. Would you allow me to keep you company, too, for as long as it takes?"

Bliss, on the other hand, caught me by surprise. One dusk, I was on a curb side ready to cross a small street branching out from a main road in Wanchai – a demonstration-trodden district on the island of Hong Kong. I noticed a car from the main road starting to turn toward me. I stopped. A woman next to me was looking in the opposite direction of the car and took one step forward. I said, in Cantonese, “”(siu<sup>2</sup> sam<sup>1</sup>) which means "Be careful!" She heard me and stopped. A man walked past and turned his head around to look at me. He gave a vague smile while throwing his left arm a little behind his side. His thumb was up. It was a familiar gesture. In mass demonstrations, gestures that acknowledge each other, identify danger and support each other to overcome it were everywhere. Do I long for these moments from the movement to come back, it had also done injuries, and that it would be almost impossible in the current legal environment? Can my nostalgia for this past be healed only through serendipities I have no control over?

Susan Stewart argues to live nostalgia is to live "a sadness without an object, a sadness which creates a longing that of necessity is inauthentic because it does not take part in lived experience. Rather, it remains behind and before that experience. Nostalgia, like any form of narrative, is always ideological: the past

<sup>11</sup> Peh T'i Wei, "Why Is Hong Kong Called 'Fragrant Harbour': A Synthesis," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society Hong Kong Branch*, vol. 54 (2014): 45, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/jroyaaisasocihkb.54.33>.

<sup>12</sup> Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, 4-7.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>14</sup> CHAT, <https://www.mill6chat.org/event/clouds-power-and-ornament-roving-central-asia/>.

<sup>15</sup> Stewart, *On Longing*, 23.

it seeks has never existed except as narrative, and hence, always absent, that past continually threatens to reproduce itself as a felt lack.”<sup>15</sup> Objects of nostalgia could be ideological. At the same time, I register, on top of sadness, anger, guilt, and a numbness that one might argue is worse than sadness, for it marks a state where one no longer knows what and how to feel. I find myself troubled by the conclusive analytical gesture in Stewart’s account of nostalgia: it is as if critical rationality that identifies nostalgia as mere ideological is enough to dismiss it as lived experience. I acknowledge the “insatiable demands of nostalgia.”<sup>16</sup> However, I propose nostalgia does not have to be dismissed as “an abdication of personal responsibility” and a “defense mechanism in a time of accelerated rhythms of life and historical upheavals.”<sup>17</sup> Nostalgia might have worked on me in different ways.

Nostalgia tells stories of change in ambivalent ways. If change is subjected to the “reign of the event”<sup>18</sup>, change is a passage from non-being to being and from immobility to mobility in a successive mode. The “before” and “after” are strictly separate from one another.<sup>19</sup> Alternatively, Francois Jullien proposes transition, which allows for “a configuration and *silent maturation* of the negative which also possesses, in parallel with this sudden irruption, its endemic manifestations [...] but has remained in this particular case hidden under the sensationalism of the Event and its effect of dramatic condensation.”<sup>20</sup> Transition “undoes” by “[holding] us back from being able to say how far any one characteristic or quality extends, where the other begins. It withdraws the pertinence from

both and reabsorbs them.”<sup>21</sup> Understanding change as transition is essential to opening up nostalgia attached with apocalyptic narratives and with a lost past, for both divide time as a neat and nameable before and after. Jullien’s insight instead draws attention to change as manifestations that linear straight lines cannot exhaust. It offers the potential of freeing the present and therefore the future from the hold of nostalgia as mere lack.

My interest in this paper is precisely what else nostalgia might be. I am thinking of the those who have left the place called Hong Kong: the anonymous ones with whom I have walked shoulder to shoulder on the streets, and the ones I can name. It is not possible to generalize them as my object of nostalgia if I were to understand what it is that nostalgia troubles me. In the following, I focus on my personal nostalgia for a Hong Kong art community without the artist and curator duo C&G Artpartment (thereafter C&G) to propose that nostalgia is neither rational nor irrational, neither positive or negative. It constitutes one layer of the many textures of that which one inherits. As Laurajane Smith puts it, “Heritage is *not* the thing, site or place, rather all heritage is intangible, as it is the processes of meaning making that occur as heritage places or events are identified, defined, managed, exhibited and visited or watched.”<sup>22</sup> To make meaning takes time. Nostalgia slows time marching forward which calls neither for obedience nor resistance. As uncertain as it is malleable, it is pathway to a figuring of a past until, or in the hope that it is eventually settled. In seeking C&G, I seek myself, my own transformation. To be nostalgic

<sup>16</sup> Stewart, *On Longing*, 135.

<sup>17</sup> Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, xiv-xv.

<sup>18</sup> Jullien. *The Silent Transformations*, 130.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 121.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

<sup>22</sup> Laurajane Smith, “Intangible Heritage: A Challenge to the Authorised Heritage Discourse,” *Ethnologia* 40, (2015):140.

might then be the beginning of an ethical and imaginative space to make alternative ways of meaning-making possible.

## A nostalgia to keep, for as long as it takes

C&G was founded in Hong Kong in 2007, and relocated to Sheffield in the U.K. in 2021. The C in C&G stands for Clara Cheung, and the G for Gum, Cheng Yee-man's nickname. They are artists, curators, intellectuals, activists, parents, art citizens, mediators, and more. Clara Cheung was an elected District Councillor until her resignation in 2021. The vacancy she left behind was among the reported 264, or 58% of district council vacant seats after an oath-taking requirement imposed by the National Security Law which disqualified some and instigated others to resign.<sup>23</sup> For having worked only a few times professionally together, and for not being close friends, the best way to describe my relation to C&G is that we are peers in the same field. By peer, I mean fellow art practitioners by commitment to values and aspirations, not by training, expertise, professional designation, or artistic interests. While I am relieved they are now safely in the U.K., I find myself nostalgic for an art community in Hong Kong with them around. That this distance between us does not fail to imbue nostalgia in me for C&G makes me curious about the demands of nostalgia. Can a relation of working-along be no less than a working-with, worth longing, even mourning for? If mourning is in the structure of thinking about nostalgia as in the mourning of a past that is no longer, what is it that I am mourning with C&G's departure? The

work of mourning, in Jacques Derrida's moving articulation, prioritizes friendship. With friends, Derrida says it is not only mourning that "follows death but also the mourning that is prepared and that we expect from the very beginning to follow upon the death of those we love. Love or friendship would be nothing other than the passion, the endurance, and the patience of this work."<sup>24</sup> For Derrida, mourning in friendship is primarily about being "obliged to declare one's debt," and to "feel it our duty to say what we owe to the friend."<sup>25</sup> However, I wonder if it would be also possible to extend the work of mourning to even the anonymous and distant relations in one's life that come by serendipity, and might be more provisional and fleeting than enduring friendships. Indebtedness may occur, appear, and appeal to us more intensely and noticeably with friends, but it is not limited to friendship, as in an occasional and accidental kindness. I must add that these gestures cannot be reduced to identity claims that are interest or community based. The notion of "Hongkonger" for instance might have been widely used to highlight the polemics between protests against Beijing's legal and political encroachment. The term also acquires more generation-specific ownership that those born and bred in Hong Kong hold up. However, it is historically imprecise as to which side of politics it is on. The term was first coined by Tanka-speaking people for a small bay in the southern part of the island of Hong Kong. Hakka-speaking people migrating from Mainland China to organize a village named "Hong Kong,"<sup>26</sup> literally meaning fragrant harbour, in the late 17<sup>th</sup> century. It was the British that applied the name to the

<sup>23</sup> Lea Li, "Hong Kong opposition district councillors say farewell to constituents after mass resignation," *South China Morning Post*, 8 August, 2022. <https://www.scmp.com/video/hong-kong/3143770/hong-kong-opposition-district-councillors-say-farewell-constituents-after>.

<sup>24</sup> Derrida, *The Work of Mourning*, 146.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 222.

<sup>26</sup> Peh T'i Wei, "Why Is Hong Kong Called 'Fragrant Harbour': A Synthesis," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society Hong Kong Branch*, vol. 54 (2014): 46, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/jroyaasisocihkb.54.33>.

entire island of Hong Kong, and subsequently, to “all the territories annexed and leased from China throughout the remainder of the nineteenth century.”<sup>27</sup> When “Hongkonger” as identity is coined as a native to challenge Beijing rule, the term is arguably conflated with the people of Mainland China as the “other”. I make this point to substantiate my claim that I limit my nostalgia to C&G as they are, not what they might represent or are identified with.

Self- and other-recognition is challenged also from the colonizer’s perspective of the “native” as “other”. Rey Chow, in *Writing Diaspora*, She argues “[T]he agency of the native cannot simply be imagined in terms of resistance against the image—that is, *after* the image has been formed—nor in terms of a subjectivity that existed *before*, beneath, inside, or outside the image. It needs to be rethought as that which bears witness to its own demolition—in a form which is at once image and gaze, but a gaze that exceeds the moment of colonization.”<sup>28</sup> Chow suggests that in, of, and for Hong Kong between the two colonizers—UK and the one-party rule of the People’s Republic of China—a different way of thinking native and other is required to crystalize the lived experience of the people of Hong Kong. “Contrary to the model of Western hegemony in which the colonizer is seen as a primary, active ‘gaze’ subjugating the native as passive ‘object,’ I want to argue that it is actually the colonizer who feels looked at by the native’s gaze. This gaze, which is neither a threat nor a retaliation, makes the colonizer ‘conscious’ of himself, leading to his need to turn this gaze around and look at himself, henceforth ‘reflected’ in the native-object.”<sup>29</sup> It is precisely the “demolition”

of the native as a clearing gesture for thinking that C&G’s work is productive for the future of nostalgia. Without structuring their work around nativism as a source of power, C&G makes self-recognition and self-reorganization negotiable. They make room for nostalgia as an ethics of reflective nostalgia, which is different from that of restorative nostalgia according to Boym. “If ethics can be defined as rules of human conduct and relationship to others, then the ethical dimension of reflective longing consists in resistance to paranoid projections characteristic of nationalist nostalgia, in which the other is conceived either as a conspiring enemy or as another nationalist. The ethics of reflective nostalgia recognizes the cultural memory of another person as well as his or her human singularity and vulnerability.”<sup>30</sup> This kind of attentiveness enables a sensitivity that “consists in the disassociation of particular sensations and memories, ready-made images, clichés, and emblems.”<sup>31</sup> In the way that C&G’s lexicon works on the edges of established global art discourses bilingually in English and Cantonese, giving the widely spoken language of Cantonese a place without rigidifying it with nativism, they enable hospitality for diverse artistic visions. The pedagogical function of nostalgia is to train the capacity to deal with ambivalence and uncertainty of whether home for such artistic visions is still possible.

Considering that some of those staying in Hong Kong—myself included—are arguably exiled, in its root meaning of a state of banishment which is not essentially locality-based, the route of home-return seems long and obscure. But the call to home that nostalgia demands is not for “timeless paradise,”<sup>32</sup> because “no one, however nostalgic is really seeking

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> Chow, *Writing Diaspora*, 51.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, 337.

<sup>31</sup> Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, 339.

<sup>32</sup> Stack, *Call to Home*, 198.

to turn back the clock [...]. What people are seeking is not so much the home they left behind as a place that they feel they can change, a place in which their lives and strivings will make a difference—a place in which to *create* a home.”<sup>33</sup> To keep seeking to return home is double-edged: it may do less to cure nostalgia than to intensify it. But it makes transformative imagination possible. Giorgio Agamben says, “it is within the imagination that the fracture between individual and impersonal, the multiple and the unique, the sensible and the intelligible takes place,” it is “within the imagination that something like a (hi)story became possible, it is through imagination that, at every new juncture, history has to be decided.”<sup>34</sup> In and from Hong Kong, there is still history to be decided with regard to the future of nostalgia.

### **Nostalgia’s pedagogical function – what I owe C&G**

C&G’s lexicon begins with its founding act: its self-naming. They liken the name C&G to existing artist partnerships and corporate labels<sup>35</sup> like Gilbert & George, Dolce & Gabbana, Bang & Olufsen, etc. They bring attention to the mesh of systemic forces that come into marking the intricate relations between the naming and branding an artist today. In more recent years, their lexicon registers a vision for a better state of affairs in a civil society in which art practitioners play a crucial part. They emphasize raising the consciousness of artists themselves as primary producers. They emphasize everyday life as relevant to contemporary art institutional development and global art discourses. In this sense, C&G’s work attests to a peer activism by

which I mean C&G’s “commitment to act”<sup>36</sup> is directed primarily to fellow artists and art practitioners. If “activism is rarely linked to specific types of action”, but a “moral drive that runs through anarchist politics,”<sup>37</sup> C&G’s peer activism is full of life because it perpetually responds to domination by not negation but negotiation. Three notable projects with which they engage with the mega development of the West Kowloon Cultural District (thereafter WKCD) demonstrates their peer activism.

WKCD was first conceived in 1998 to provide large-scale venues for art and cultural events. The policy address by the then Chief Executive of Hong Kong Tung Chee Hwa says, “I realise that this cannot be done without proper venues for world-class events. The Government is committed to providing more support in this area, and as a catalyst for upgrading our image as Asia’s entertainment capital we are planning for a new, state-of-the-art performance venue on the West Kowloon reclamation.”<sup>38</sup> This development includes the first contemporary art museum in Hong Kong, M+, which officially opened in 2021.

WKCD as an institution accentuates the “exceptionalism” that Arne De Boever registers as structuring the art world – the art, the artist, and its place in the market:

The West Kowloon Cultural District is one of the largest and most ambitious cultural projects in the world. Its vision is to create a vibrant new cultural quarter for Hong Kong on forty hectares of reclaimed land located alongside Victoria Harbour. With a mix of theatres,

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 199.

<sup>34</sup> Agamben, *Nymphs*, 60-1.

<sup>35</sup> C&G, *C&G Artpartment 2007-2008*, 4.

<sup>36</sup> Ruth Kinna, *The Government of No One*, 116.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 115.

<sup>38</sup> Tung Chee Hwa, “Chief Executive of HKSAR Government policy address,” 1998, <https://www.policyaddress.gov.hk/pa98/english/econ2.htm>.

performance spaces, and museums, the West Kowloon Cultural District produces and hosts world-class exhibitions, performances and cultural events. When complete, it will provide three hectares of public open space, including a two-kilometre waterfront promenade.<sup>39</sup>

A pioneer narrative drives the description.<sup>40</sup> Aiming to push frontiers, the pioneer charts, conquers, and occupies territories, extracting from and creating value of them that is claimed solely by the pioneer. Clothed in blinding light, the narrative is bereft of the artist, human connection, and love.

C&G responded to the ideology of development in art in multiple ways. One project entitled “To Tsang, C.E. – Conceptual Art Exhibition”(2007) addressed Donald Tsang, the then Chief Executive of Hong Kong SAR government (2005–07), as the policy-maker, the patron, and spectator of art all at once. The project involved exhibitions and public participatory events. The curatorial statement was an open letter that thanked Tsang for WKCD as a gift. C&G vows to “present our art gifts to him in person afterwards” so that he will understand more about “local art” and “perhaps show his support of local art by purchasing a piece of work from this exhibit [sic].”<sup>41</sup> Evoking the gift economy as parallel to the monetary one, positioning themselves as active, thinking agents driving the development of art, C&G advocates for the kind of material and symbolic support artists need that the single-mindedness of WKCD as an issue for economic development has missed.

Naming the project “conceptual art” shows the ownership they claim for artists in Hong

Kong for sharing the lineage of categorization that began in Western art institutions, but travelling and contestable. To place the projects in relation to the lineage is to acknowledge having been constituted by it, while also parodying it and recontextualizing it. They do not dismiss the discourse in general, but troubles the part where it becomes self-exaltation. In so doing, C&G reverses exceptionalism. Arne De Boever argues, to un-work the structure of entitlement in exceptionalism requires a return to the artists for “the procedure or operation of the unexceptional takes place first and foremost with artists themselves, with those who make the work and know how the work was made.”<sup>42</sup> C&G uses the exhibition as a familiar form of presenting art and the open letter as a familiar form of civic engagement to address ruling power directly. But they take ruling power not only as a disinterested, impersonal policy-maker, but also as an equal player in the art world. They demand that the ruling power looks at them as who they are: they “[unworks the] exceptionalism into the unexceptional, so that they will be able to see art for what it is: just art.”<sup>43</sup> Art is a human activity and it is from this nature that artists offer themselves.

From 2016, C&G presented six editions of “Decongestants for West Kowloonization”. “West Kowloon” as a place-name in ordinary usage has become a sign performing promises of progress in WKCD. The umbrella title of the project is itself a critique: by naming the process of development “West Kowloonization”, C&G placed it on par with “Disneyization” and “McDonaldization” to identify art development as trans-corporatization, standardization, monopolization, and commodification. The physical site for the project – a small public

<sup>39</sup> WKCD, “West Kowloon Cultural District”, n.d., <https://www.mplus.org.hk/en/the-building/west-kowloon-cultural-district/>.

<sup>40</sup> De Boever, *Against Aesthetic Exceptionalism*, 81.

<sup>41</sup> C&G Artpartment, *C&G Artpartment 2007-2008*, 64.

<sup>42</sup> De Boever, *Against Aesthetic Exceptionalism*, 80.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 81.

garden a five-minute walking distance from C&G's studio in the centre of Kowloon peninsula – contested the totalizing impact WKCD claims to have on "Kowloon".

"Decongestant" is a metaphoric remedy to the "blockage" that mega institutional changes induced onto local art practitioners. Decongestants are mundane but significant antidotes: blockage of air flow could be fatal, or, it makes one just a little dizzy. The impact varies among artists; it is open for their art peers' interpretation. One way to "decongest" was through "play." Decongestant I (2016) was titled Soil, Play (lok<sup>6</sup> nai<sup>4</sup> waan<sup>2</sup>). The middle character in Chinese is literally, soil or mud. It puns with the idea of "to come" (loi<sup>4</sup>). While "come play" is a neutral act, come play in mud suggests getting dirty. The deliberate agrammatical rendering of the English translation, or, one might say, the deliberate broken English used alongside the Cantonese, could be at once the beginning of play, or an invitation for further parody. Bridging an ultra-personal ailment to large-scale art development with a lexicon grounded in the everyday life of Hong Kong opens up questions that not only concern artists, but become accessible to them. C&G's peer activism exposes the limits of gigantism: it misses the details.

While the theme of each edition varies, the lexicon presents the consistent use of the present participle of *-ing*. Such activities as "accusing" and "denouncing," "cursing," "performing," "demanding" and "aspiring"<sup>44</sup> have project-specific significance in that participating artists enact them during the annual Ghost Festival – lunar calendar July 14<sup>th</sup>. When it comes to "impossible missions on earth", according to C&G, "trading" with "spirits" is necessary. Burning paper money for the dead during the festival remains a popular practice

on the streets of Hong Kong on this day. Folk traditions are simplified and appropriated for contemporary causes of social change. C&G describes the actions offering ways to "dissolve speech" (faa<sup>3</sup> taam<sup>4</sup>), which puns, in Cantonese, with to "dissolve phlegm" (faa<sup>3</sup> taam<sup>4</sup>). The former is an invented composite term. The latter is a popularly used term in herbal medicinal remedies. As the formalized discourse of art development by mega institutions perpetuates, C&G's engagement with it turns abstraction into lived experiences. These activities also go beyond the project. They are habits of heart and mind pertaining to perpetual refusal of established discourses on an everyday basis as ways to keep thinking about and contesting the gigantism they are subjected to.

Their use of the vernacular as a gentle assault, a call to suspension the seamlessness of global art talk, is comparable to Martha Rosler's practice. As Steve Edwards puts it, Rosler "mobilised vernacular forms in a deflationary assault on the elevated practices of art-making and art world talk, which she views as mired in individualism and expressionism, masculine assumptions, unquestioned universal values and studio routines."<sup>45</sup> Like Rosler, one could argue C&G's vernacular "pitted imagery against abstraction, and mixed forms against medium specificity, irony and detachment against subjective individualism and low modes against high-flown claims."<sup>46</sup> This is especially important for artists who do not identify with the kind of restrictive professionalism that privileges particular ways of art making, and those who may doubt "politics" to prefer keeping a personal or artistic distance from it. C&G restores the agency of artists keeping a distance from art development for different reasons. Their technique seeks not to seize power by antagonism. It is instead committed to trou-

<sup>44</sup> C&G, 2023, [https://www.candg-artpartment.com/about\\_c\\_g.html](https://www.candg-artpartment.com/about_c_g.html).

<sup>45</sup> Steve Edwards, *Martha Rosler: The Bowery in two inadequate descriptive systems*, 75–6.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 76.

<sup>47</sup> Ruth Kinna, *The Government of No One*, 101–2.

bling the limiting dichotomy of compliance and rebellion.<sup>47</sup> It is a peer activism for non-domination.<sup>48</sup> As each action is individualized to complicate the rationalist and modernist tendencies in understanding political dissent directed from the powerless to those in power, C&G's lexicon exceeds dissent in that they offer heuristic devices for digesting nameable and un-nameable troubles. Their lexicon demonstrates that they are politically informed, socially concerned, and profoundly committed to art and the well-being of artists in circumstances they might not have control of. It takes empathy and sensitivity on the part of C&G for such a peer activism be conceived.

One might argue that their lexicon sounds a bit "off" for generating subtle, or no consequences in the short run when considered from the viewpoint of official drives for art development. However, to be "off" could also be to make value in alternative ways. Boym says, "The eccentric adverb *off* relieves the pressure of being fashionable and the burden of defining oneself as either pre- or postmodern."<sup>49</sup> It takes ambivalence as a transition that, in Maxine Greene's sense of "wide-awareness"<sup>50</sup>, could release us from the demand that we "accede to the world as 'given,' as officially and expertly described."<sup>51</sup> C&G offers discursive resources that are down-to-earth, opening up channels of access rather than accession, actively engaging with global art talk with a local accent.

As I write, some art peers in Hong Kong and the UK are formalizing a non-profit art collective with C&G. For me, the question now is less of whether nostalgia for C&G and all that they mean is justified or not. It is rather how I could respond to a nostalgia that needs a home. To offer nostalgia hospitality, I can delink it from such particular place-names as "Hong Kong" and particular persons as I have

known them in the past. I can start making home with an accent, until one day nostalgia exhausts what it can teach me.

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<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 83–4.

<sup>49</sup> Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, 31.

<sup>50</sup> Greene, *Variations on a Blue Guitar*, 148.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.



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